

## International Programs

# Understanding the Wider Caribbean Region

The Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) represents four million square kilometers and some 36 countries and territories, each with sovereign rights, separate conservation agendas and priorities based on socio-economic issues. However, they share at least 32 recorded marine mammal species that have significant ecological, aesthetic and economic value to the countries and territories of the region.

Some species are resident year-round while others are seasonal visitors. For many, these waters serve as their primary habitat for a range of critical activities including feeding, mating and calving. For example, every winter, after spending the summer feeding in cool nutrient-rich waters at higher latitudes of the North Atlantic, thousands of endangered humpback whales migrate to the warm waters of the Caribbean region to mate and give birth.

Threats to marine mammals and marine ecosystems persist and new threats continue to emerge. Marine mammals are vulnerable to short-term natural and human-related threats, and also to the chronic, cumulative effects of various stresses. Conservation measures that are already in force should be evaluated on an ongoing basis and new approaches need to be developed to address threats that were unidentified, or non-existent, until recently.



Credit: NOAA



The Caribbean Sea, with its deep water basins, estuaries, oceanic islands, steep drop-offs, varied topography, as well as shallow offshore sand banks and coral reefs, provides a diverse range of conditions and habitats suitable for a variety of marine mammal species, including oceanic species usually found far offshore. In some areas where volcanic coastlines drop steeply within a few kilometers of the shore, whales and dolphins may be seen quite close to land.

Success in managing and conserving marine mammals ultimately depends on countries' commitments to building their internal capacities and to implementing regional guidelines by establishing conservation priorities, standards, and strategies for marine mammal conservation and education. To assist governments in the region, in 2008 the United Nations Environment Programme's Caribbean Environment Programme (UNEP-CEP) developed an Action Plan for the Conservation of Marine Mammals in the Wider Caribbean Region (MMAP). The MMAP identifies specific threats and suggests implementation timetables for both national and regional level priority actions.

Priorities are based on the range and conservation status of affected species, the level of impact on species populations, the number of animals affected, the need for knowledge and awareness, and the potential for improved protection and threat mitigation. Within the regional context of the MMAP, countries may address their own specific priority issues and species by developing and implementing National Marine Mammal Action, Management and Recovery Plans.